

# Commission Report Should Prompt a Re-examination of New England Higher Education

BLENDY J. WILSON

**T**he national Commission on the Future of Higher Education provides some deserved criticism of the way U.S. higher education currently works. Insofar as higher education institutions are the intellectual and economic engines that power New England, it is prudent for us to re-examine higher education in New England today from the perspective of the commission's report, *A Test of Leadership*.

**Access.** The commission correctly observes that the major impediments to improving access to college for young people are: 1) achievement inequities at the K-12 level, and 2) the disconnect between the expectations of the K-12 and higher education communities.

In New England, the inequities between K-12 students of color and white students and between wealthy and poor students are pronounced. This does not bode well for the region, since the number of white high school graduates is projected to shrink by 18,000 by 2018, while the number of minority students will grow by 11,000. New England is also experiencing an increase in the number of school-age children living in poverty. In Rhode Island, for example, an estimated 21 percent of children under age 18 live in poverty.

The so-called Spellings Commission recommends that states adopt high school curricula that prepare all students for participation in postsecondary education and that higher education play a strong role in improving K-12 education. Higher education institutions in New England must work more closely with K-12 schools to make sure that a larger percentage of the region's fastest growing populations have a chance to graduate from high school and succeed in college. Already, partnerships between the University of Massachusetts Lowell and Lowell High School and between UMass Boston and the Dorchester Education Complex create an environment of high expectations and academic achievement while providing high school students with access to rigorous courses, mentoring, advising and assessment. Partnerships like these can help lead the way in expanding access to higher education for New England high school students.

**Cost and Affordability.** The issues of access and affordability are inextricably linked. No matter how well students perform in high school, the high cost of college attendance will be a significant barrier for large numbers of low- and moderate-income students.

In New England, the cost of college is especially prohibitive. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reports that for New England families in the bottom 40 percent of incomes, the cost of attending a public four-year college—tuition and

room and board minus financial aid—will absorb up to half of annual household incomes. These costs are an insurmountable obstacle to college participation even for "college-ready" students.

The commission recommends that new incentives be developed for institutions to improve cost management, productivity and efficiency as ways to control costs. The commission rejected price controls but hinted that limiting the growth in college tuition to the growth in median family income over a five-year period, for example, would be an appropriate use of benchmarking. Such policies would be particularly meaningful in those New England states where major declines in traditional industries and a slow recovery from the economic recession of the late 1990s have limited growth of household incomes.

**Financial Aid.** One reason New England's public colleges and universities are less affordable than the national average is that the New England states invest far less in public higher education and grant aid than states in other regions. Also, as in other states, new non-need based financial aid programs, such as the John and Abigail Adams scholarships for high achievers in Massachusetts have diverted already-diminished student aid dollars away from the neediest students.

*"States should provide incentives for higher education institutions to make long-term commitments to working actively and collaboratively with K-12 schools and systems to help underserved students improve college preparation and persistence."*

*"The philanthropic community and other third-party organizations are urged to invest in the research and development of instruments measuring the intersection of institutional resources, student characteristics, and educational value-added. Tools should be developed that aggregate data at the state level and that also can be used for institutional benchmarking."*

*"Reports from those working at the grassroots level in fields such as teacher preparation and math and science education indicate that the results of scholarly research on teaching and learning are rarely translated into practice. Little of the significant research of the past decade in areas such as cognitive science, neurosciences, and organizational theory is making it into American classroom practice, whether at the K-12 level or in colleges and universities."*

—A Test of Leadership, Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Of all the commission's recommendations, those that would restructure the student financial aid system and consolidate federal grant programs to increase the purchasing power of need-based Pell Grants have received the most positive response from higher education. New England institutions and students would benefit greatly from such policies. In addition, if New England states increased their financial support to public higher education up to at least the national average, institutions could make higher education more affordable by rolling back some of the costs they have passed on to students and their families in recent years.

**Student Preparation.** The commission report emphasizes the importance of improving student readiness for higher education. This is mostly a charge for high schools, but higher education has a role to play in enhancing the preparation of teachers and creating greater transparency about what it takes for students to succeed in college. New England states have led the nation in K-12 reform, developing state tests of high school performance and increasing graduation standards. Massachusetts, for example, is one of just nine states to receive a grade of "Plus" from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education for developing measures of college learning. Ensuring that students from low-income, rural and urban schools can meet these high standards must continue to be a high priority for New England's education policymakers.

**Accountability.** The commission's recommendations that colleges and universities become more transparent about cost, price and student success are perhaps the most controversial areas of the report. The report

embraces a "value added" form of evaluation and public reporting for colleges, based more on judgments about what students learn while they're in college than what they know when they enter. This would be a new and potentially demanding standard for a region whose reputation as a higher education leader has rested on the prestige of some highly selective private institutions thought to admit the "best and the brightest."

College Ready New England, an initiative of the New England Board of Higher Education, should go a long way toward improving the overall understanding of what constitutes success for our higher education community. By helping the New England states collect and share key data on issues such as college preparedness, enrollment, persistence and graduation rates, this regional effort should increase the transparency and accountability of higher education. There are, however, no regional plans at this time to require value-added measures of student learning.

To sustain even our current level of prosperity, we must expand college access and affordability and improve performance. The changes that are required do not reside in the recommendations of the Spellings Commission report, but in the commitment and wisdom of New England policymakers, business leaders, education and higher education officials whom the report calls to lead.

---

*Blenda J. Wilson recently retired as president and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, where she will continue to serve as a consultant until June 2007. Email: bwilson@nmefdn.org.*

---

## Could Transparency Bring Economic Diversity?

RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

The Spellings Commission report calls for greater access to higher education for low- and moderate-income students, greater transparency in the way higher education works and greater accountability for producing results. These recommendations are all significant in their own right, but the three concepts also converge to provide powerful support for an important new idea: requiring greater transparency and accountability of colleges for whether or not they are honoring a commitment to the American Dream—the ideal that someone from even the most humble background can, through hard work and talent, get a good education and do well in American society.

The report's emphasis on equity for low-income students is welcome. As the commission notes (in more polite language) dumb rich kids in America are as likely to go to college as smart poor kids. The commission's recommendation to boost the purchasing

power of the Pell Grant, which has significantly eroded over time, is vital. Whereas the Pell Grant once covered 40 percent of the total cost of a private four-year college education, today it covers 15 percent.

The problem of access identified in the report is particularly acute at the nation's most selective colleges and universities. Selective institutions have done an admirable job of promoting racial diversity on campus, but according to a Century Foundation study of the nation's most selective 146 colleges, only 3 percent of students come from the bottom socioeconomic quarter of the population, while 74 percent come from the richest quarter. Put differently, one is 25 times as likely to run into a rich student as a poor student on the nation's most selective campuses. Just 10 percent of students at these institutions come from the bottom socioeconomic half, according to the study conducted by researchers Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose.

Carnevale and Rose find further that many more low-income and working-class students could do the